

SCHOOLS PLAN NEW CODE OF CONDUCT

Aims to reduce reliance on suspensions, and offers new student bill of rights

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A draft code of conduct for Rochester students released Thursday aims to reduce dramatically the reliance on suspensions in the district and enumerates for the first time a students' bill of rights.

Among the 16 items listed in that bill of rights: an impartial grievance process; freedom from unreasonable search of property; and the ability to express oneself verbally and "to dress in such a way as to express one's identity and personality."

The rewrite is being done by a task force on school climate, convened by the district and the Rochester Area Community Foundation. It is an acknowledgment that administrators in the city have resorted too quickly to suspending students for sometimes petty misbehavior.

The first draft of the section relating to students was released Thursday. There will be five weeks of eliciting public input before it is finalized.

"If it's a nonviolent offense, there's no need for a student to be kicked out of school," said Adair Liles, a 12th-grader at Rochester Early College International High School who sits on the task force. "There should be a justice process where a student can learn from their mistake."

One in five Rochester students was suspended at least once in 2012-13, and blacks, Hispanics and students with disabilities were much more likely to be suspended, according to district data.

The proposed code deals more with how to help students than how to punish them. It includes a matrix of restorative practices for use in various situations and mandates they be exhausted before punitive action is taken.

It delineates four levels of student misbehavior and would permit suspensions only for the two most troublesome. It also strongly discourages calling the police except in very dangerous cases.

Among the sorts of things that wouldn't trigger suspensions is "disor

See CONDUCT, Page [12A](#)



CARLOS ORTIZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Students leave Thursday after attending classes through the City School District summer school program at the Edison High campus. A revised code of conduct for students under consideration would change the district's approach to handling misbehavior.

CARLOS ORTIZ/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



"If you are going to suspend a student, at least give them their work."

STUDENT NATHAN KIMBROUGH

Article Continued Below

[See CONDUCT on Page A12](#)

Conduct

Continued from Page 1A

derly/disruptive behavior." That is significant, because 49 percent of the 6,373 total suspensions in 2012-13 were classified as punishment for "other disruptive incidents." Another 30 percent were for "minor altercations."

Nathan Kimbrough said he was suspended twice last year during his freshman year in the PTech program at the Edison High School campus.

In one incident, he said he cursed at a teacher who told him he was going to end up living in his mother's basement. In the other, he threw a biology book at a student who spit on him.

Kimbrough said he overreacted in both circumstances and thinks that his punishments were fair. "Fighting and cursing at teachers, yeah, you should be suspended," he said, while waiting for a bus Thursday afternoon. He added that the girl who spit on him ought to have been suspended too, but wasn't.

But kids shouldn't get suspended for lesser offenses, he said, like sleeping during class.

Kimbrough said one of his friends was kicked out of school after refusing to pick his head up from his desk during a lesson.

"Sleeping during class, I don't think that's fair," he said. He also thinks that suspended students should be given the chance to keep up on their lessons while they are out. He was given no schoolwork to take home and spent his suspension time hanging out at a friend's house. "If you are going to suspend a student, at least give them their work," he said.

Quinton Wilson believes that students who fight in school should be suspended to protect other students. He attended Charlotte High School and will attend All City High in the fall.

During certain periods at Charlotte, he witnessed fights in the cafeteria, classrooms, and the hallways "everywhere, every day," he said.

"The ones that come to school just to fight really should get suspended," he said. "Or be put in a school where there is a very strict way that they deal with children who like to fight a lot."

The new code would require extensive data collection, something that was sorely lacking until recently.

The task force is asking for community feedback by Aug. 31 so the code can be fine-tuned before it goes to the Board of Education for consideration.

A survey is available at rcsdk12.org/codeofconduct.

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Teacher Michael Harris explains problems in a geometry class Thursday during a summer school class at the Edison campus.

CARLOS ORTIZ/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



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STUDENT QUINTON WILSON

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